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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by KATHLEEN BLISS

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AMONG OUR READERS there must be more than a few who as students or as senior friends have taken part in one or more of the Quadrennial Conferences organized by the Student Christian Movement in the days before the war. So many conferences of all kinds are held in these days that the statement that yet another has just ended is more likely to elicit a groan than a cheer. The bringing together in such times as these of over 1,500 students in the British Isles together with 200 from the Continent, and speakers, group leaders and visitors from Britain, Europe and America needs some justification. The first, and many would think an ample justification for the holding of the Westminster Conference from January 5–10 is the success of the long series of Quadrennial Conferences of which the last was held in 1937.

NEWS-LETTER

STUDENTS AT WESTMINSTER

SUPPLEMENT

HOME AND COMMUNITY
BY
MOIRA SYMONS

The object of the pre-war Quadrennial Conferences was to open the eyes of members of each student generation to the tasks and achievements of the Church in all parts of the world, and to lay squarely on their shoulders the claims of the Church in all parts of the world, not only for their understanding but for their service. In those days when the ecumenical movement was in its infancy the Quadrennials performed a unique function. They gave to students over the years, by bringing together in one place speakers and students from all parts of the world, a new

conception of the meaning of the word " Church ", catching them up for a few days into a context of worship and Christian thought. Those who demanded " solid results " from these conferences got them in the sharp rise in the number of students volunteering for missionary service which followed every Quadrennial.

STUDENTS AT WESTMINSTER

Anyone who had attended a Quadrennial in earlier days found at Westminster many similarities—the same high level of congregational singing (where else among Christians are hymns better sung ?)—the same eager and expectant worship, the same vitality, the same spirit of inquiry, the same eager knots of students clustered round the speaker in so-called free time, the same sensitive response to any speaker who had a message to give. There were more dark faces in the audiences, especially Africans. Sixty German prisoners of war, most of them members of branches of the Student Christian Movement in P.O.W. camps, attended the whole Conference and played a full part in the discussion groups. Twelve students came over from Germany, and among other Europeans were Czechs and Finns.

But both the aim and the conduct of the Westminster Conference differed from the old Quadrennials, and the old name was dropped. One might perhaps summarize the difference in aim by saying that, whereas the message of the Quadrennials was " Here is a picture of the Church at work in all quarters of the globe ; what are you going to do about it ? " the message of Westminster was " Here is the world in which the Christian has to practise his faith : how are you going to live your life in this sort of world ? " It might be true to say that the Westminster Conference was the reflection in the life of the Student Christian Movement of the increasing influence of " frontier " thinking.

If the subject was to be the Christian in the modern world, and the modern world was to be portrayed in such a way as to unmask its underlying reality and not merely to comment upon its superficial phenomena, then two things were necessary : first, the carving up of the subject into manageable slices, and secondly,

some preliminary study by all those attending the Conference on one of four main fields of study. These were:

I. Persons in the Modern World.

II. Christian obedience in post-war Britain.

III. British citizens in world affairs.

IV. Christian obedience in the University.

On each of these main themes a handbook of some 30 or 40 pages was prepared.[1] Each theme was divided into seven sections, containing subject matter, questions and bibliography. In registering for attendance students made a choice, the results of which are interesting, since they reflect the main preoccupations of students. Far the largest number chose to study *Persons in the Modern World*. The reason for this choice gradually became clear. For some it was an escape from the complexities of national and international affairs, and for some it seemed to offer a chance for discussing something out of experience without the burden of reading involved in other choices. A very few students had the perspicacity to see that this course of study was basic to all others and that to ask "What is a person?" is one of the most difficult and not one of the easiest modern questions. Beginning with some of the practical problems of living in a technical society where common assumptions about the value of persons no longer exist, this syllabus soon plunges into an exposition of the Christian conception of a person, and then deals with the marks of the true person, his recreation by worship, and the life of the Christian student in family and in college.

The next most popular study was that on *The British Citizen in World Affairs*, which surprisingly interested more students than British affairs. The reasons for this were partly the consciousness that immense issues were at stake in this realm.

The fourth study, *Christian Obedience in the University*, was the least popular though it enlisted some of the best students. This is a new field and in spite of the publication and wide circulation of twelve university pamphlets, already strongly recommended

[1] The four study handbooks are produced by the Student Christian Movement, Annandale, North End Road, London, N.W. 11. Price 9d. each. A fifth *Christian Obedience in the Modern World* outlines all four themes.

in the Christian News-Letter (C.N-L. No. 272), few students are particularly interested in the university as a community with a way of life and thought based on certain assumptions, or see the point of bringing it under Christian judgment.

With as much respect as could be paid to their choices, delegates were allotted to one of four Commissions, one on each study, and the Commissions were sub-divided into twenty groups which, under a senior leader, met for three hours daily to work on the syllabus. The good level of discussion in groups was due to the fact that not only had the leaders been chosen long in advance and brought together for a training week-end, but that in every group a certain number of students had already worked over the syllabus in a ten-days' study Conference at Swanwick last summer. Many who were at Westminster will go back to their colleges to become leaders of study on the same themes.

The editor was involved in the Conference as chief commission leader of the Commission on *British Citizens in World Affairs*. In all the Commissions a concentrated effort was made to enlist the services of lay people as group leaders. Among the twenty-five group leaders in this Commission were civil servants who gave up part of their annual leave to do this work, members of one or two learned bodies, members of the staff of the World Student Christian Federation (including two Frenchmen), a few university teachers and members of the staffs of missionary societies. I was greatly impressed by the energy and wisdom with which these group leaders threw themselves into the conduct of the groups, made foreign students feel at home, evoked speech from the silent and coaxed the important issues to the fore. One of the great strengths of the Student Christian Movement is the wide range of experience upon which it can call for work of this kind.

The syllabus of my Commission left much to be desired. It contained too much. It also suffered more than others in being overtaken by events—Cominform, the failure of the Foreign Ministers' Conference and the general strike in France still lay in the future when this syllabus went to press. Yet, given good leadership, every group of twenty students got from the syllabus some idea of what are the critical problems of our time.

One great value of the groups lay in their international make-up. It is one thing to discuss the British Empire. It is quite another to discuss it with self-conscious and articulate Indians and Africans ; it is no doubt good for British students to discuss their responsibilities as citizens and Christians to Germany, but the discussion is of a different order when there is a German present. The outstanding fact revealed by these discussions was the ignorance of most students. By comparison with most European students in the groups they were ill-informed. A few had a wide general interest but had not mastered for example UNO terminology : a few had strong particular interests—Federal Union for example : a few were communists or near communists or had been to Yugoslavia. Many clearly did not bother to read a good weekly or daily newspaper, and the most common practical decision taken was to do so in future. Here and there the opinion was expressed that the salient facts are kept in the hands of Governments and the ordinary person is prevented from having a point of view, a labour-saving fallacy with a superficial grain of truth in it to make it highly dangerous. It points to the urgent need for the press in this country to disseminate facts and to press always for their free disclosure by Governments.

An equally great general ignorance prevailed about the Church, and one was compelled to ask whether the average local minister and congregation recognize any responsibility for informing young people about the Church in the world, its tasks and achievements. Most of the students in the groups had not received the older type of missionary teaching or read the usual missionary literature, nor on the other hand, had the ecumenical movement with its emphasis on the younger Churches reached them. This generalization is true also of theological students, whose ignorance of Churches outside their own communion was frequently astonishing. A great many students felt that reunion was a nice idea, but that variety was to be preferred, and here again theological students rarely brought to the discussion any idea that the disunity of the Churches might perhaps be due more to the rebellion of man than to the will of God.

The chief comment I would make on the work of this Commission is on the difficulty of persuading students that they have a Christian duty which is fulfilled through political means. There was a widespread notion that if the Christian saved his sweet ration and his butter and clothes for Germany or made a point of being friendly towards African students, he could safely leave the political relationships between Britain and Germany, and Britain and her colonies to others. The idea that charity is an alternative to justice dies very hard. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, who was indefatigable in visiting groups and in talking informally to students, remarked that one fact which he had not met in similar conferences in this country, of which he has long experience, gave him great concern. This was the readiness with which some students, and markedly theological students, faced with a problem needing hard thinking, would " quit grappling with the here and now and take an elevator up to the eternal ", where refuge could be found in theological platitudes. At least some students will have learned from him, as he in a remarkable public address said that he had learned from experience, " There was a time when I had all the answers. My real growth began when I discovered that the questions to which I had the answers were not the important questions."

At the end of one of the group reports handed to me by a student acting as scribe is the following personal note: " I came to this Conference in great bewilderment as to international affairs. I leave it in even greater bewilderment on international affairs, but from it I have experienced (1) a sense of awareness of the magnitude of the task that lies before all Christians; (2) refusal to despair, and (3) the necessity of immediate response to the call of God to work anywhere."

The question of vocation raises sharp problems. Missionary service in a foreign field used to be regarded as a sort of Honours degree in Christian living, a way of giving one's life entirely to Christ's service without reserve and without the complicating factors of divided loyalties involved in a secular calling at home. All that has changed, and missionary societies are now finding very great difficulty in finding persons suitable in character and training for all the posts they have to fill. It is not only that the

reality of " darkest England " has persuaded many who might otherwise have gone abroad that there is plenty of scope for Christian evangelism and service at home. Many other factors enter in. One is the widespread realization that being a missionary in modern conditions does not offer the simple life of preaching the Gospel to the heathen, untrammelled by forms, rules, economic pressures, institutional set-ups and so on. We of the West are much concerned with the decline of a culture to which Christianity has made such large contributions that we often speak of it as a Christian culture. We forget that to Africa and the East Christianity came as a culture-breaking, not a culture-preserving force. While some of this breaking down was due to the Western sense of superiority rather than to Christian truth, yet converts were often even stronger than missionaries in declaring that Christianity meant a decisive break with a non-Christian culture. This threw on the missionary societies the task of educating and of healing (the role of rules and standards of health in a culture is seldom mentioned in modern Christian diagnoses of the breakdown of our western culture, though much is said of it in the Old Testament). This cultural task offers the westerner full opportunities of doing a worth while job in company with members of the indigenous Church, but work of this kind will not necessarily always be done directly by the Church ; much of it will pass to secular authorities and Christians will find their Christian obedience within it. A missionary society is not the Church but is an instrument of it, doing a job half in the Church and half in the new kind of secular order which the presence of the Church in a community begins to call into being. Lack of clarification here has caused confusion.

But this question of missionary vocation is also a part of a much larger question of vocation which came to the surface in every one of the four Commissions. Until some unspecified date—perhaps one might say that until the fear of the second world war began to settle on Europe, the members of the middle classes had a firm belief both in the social usefulness of a chosen professional career and also in a stable social order which would enable a man in his youth to ask and answer the question " What shall I do with my life ? " without sounding either a little self-important or a little unrealistic. But a quotation

from a letter from an American student who came to the Oslo Conference shows the change. "Your remarks about Albert Schweitzer planning his life have caused some concern at this end. . . . The big question is: Can we really dedicate and plan a life? Isn't it true that we can only strengthen ourselves in basic essentials of living and meet the world accordingly?" If such questions arise in the mind of an American student, living in a free economy, how much more will they arise in the mind of a British student who can (and does) ask whether he must not either find a vocation in the job or place to which he is directed by the Ministry of Labour, or cease to believe in the idea of vocation at all. Indeed the point of view that Christian vocation only means doing the job in which you find yourself in as Christian a way as possible compelled group leaders and a smaller minority of students to urge that Christian vocation may and should also mean the deliberate choice of a life work, which may be broken to pieces by circumstances beyond one's control but is nevertheless a choice made before God. There is more in this matter than the ordering of individual lives. The idea of God laying his hand on a man and calling him to a particular service has been to the whole Christian community down the ages a constant summons to higher levels of endeavour, and an assertion that God takes, through his servants, an initiative towards events.

THE SUPPLEMENT

The writer of this supplement has been a member of staff both of the Student Christian Movement and of the world's Y.W.C.A. She and her husband, W. G. Symons, have made their home in a one-time general shop in an industrial village now part of the city of Sheffield. The results of this choice are reflected in the supplement.

Kathleen Bliss

HOME AND COMMUNITY

By MOIRA SYMONS

To how many people, I wonder, is *the* picture of home one of a cosy living room on a winter evening, curtains drawn and door shut against the dark and the cold, firelight playing on the faces of parents and children? The community is there outside, a background which provides living, schooling, lighting, recreation, social services—it is something in which the family has a certain part, but it is always a background, always outside, always apart from the precious intimacy of family life.

Now it is very nice to draw the curtains and shut the door. It is something every family ought to be able to do. But the family is never an end in itself, belonging only to us. It is an integral part of the organic whole which is the life of society, and in its daily contacts with and understanding of the community in which it is set it should express that fundamental unity. The very bricks and mortar which make the home were placed there by the work of many hands; our possessions—furniture, clothes, food, books—bring the labour of the whole world into it. The door opens on to a road that leads to school, to work, to shops, to other towns, cities, and villages and eventually to the ends of the earth. The road itself (unless you are unfortunate enough to live on a private one!) would not be there if it were not made and kept by the local authority. Up and down it go countless men and women on every kind of errand, each a person with a life of his own touching who knows how many other lives. The family looks out of the home and the community looks in. The family goes out on its daily affairs and the community walks in in the person of the postman, the milkman, the dustman, the coal man, the doctor, the parson, the plumber, the family friends and so on. It is a fascinating picture seen in all its implications, and if the family is to make its full contribution to the life of society it must feel the fascination of its unity with, and dependence

on, the world outside. Service to the community thus becomes a thing of joy as well as duty. Social work carried out from a sense of obligation, or even as a result of the desire for power, is better than a selfish refusal to accept responsibility; yet the desire to serve the community is surely at its best when it springs from real enjoyment of the society in which one is set. When men and women serve their town or locality because they *belong* to it and love it, because its life blood is theirs, then their work is truly creative and they are alert to its needs and possibilities as a community.

THE CHURCH NOT ENOUGH

A great deal of Christian teaching, and consequently of superficial Christian thought, makes contact more readily between the life of the family and that of the Church. Through our marriage vows, the baptism of our children, in public worship week by week, we find something which binds our families into a larger whole without which we know we should be lost and incomplete. We can see that and yet fail to see that God means us to extend that sense of unity, of *belonging*, to the community as a whole. Deep as the roots of the family go and wide as the life of the Church is spread, both are inadequate for the fellowship God intends us to experience. The Church may be the leaven in the lump, but we are meant to live in the lump. In the family especially God has given us an experience which should teach us His love for all men. We are bound through His Fatherhood to all His children. The fellowship of the Christian Church, great as it is, is in a sense incomplete until it is complemented by the experience of practical secular affairs embracing Christian and unbeliever alike. I cannot avoid being personal at this and other points, for it is out of my own experience that the whole concern expressed in this Supplement has been born. I owe more than I can ever express to the "unsearchable riches of Christ manifest in the life of his Church", yet it is in associations of a purely secular nature—in queues, on buses, talking to my neighbours, in a Trade Union, a Co-op. Guild, the W.E.A., the local

Labour Party, the Child Welfare Clinic, the School Parents Association—that I have found myself irrevocably and *practically* committed to " all sorts and conditions of men ". It is since I have learnt, all too slowly, to become really " at home " in ordinary communities that I have found something which sustains me in a different, but no less satisfying, way than does the fellowship of the Church. And I believe it to be satisfying because, no less than the fellowship of the Church, it is God-given and God-intended. That sustaining power of the community was a real experience to most people during the war because it was something they knew they could not do without. It is still there for us to draw upon if only we recognize our lasting and fundamental need of it.

THE SECURITY OF THE CHILD

This fact means much for our home life. It is a commonplace of Child Psychology that a sense of security is one of the primary requirements of happy childhood. During the first few years the centre of that security is in the home and especially in the person of the mother. But very soon, by the age of five at any rate, when the child's contacts are naturally enlarged by school, we must begin deliberately to extend the basis of security to the community as a whole, until it eventually develops into a sense of belonging to, and significance in, a wide fellowship of work, service and leisure. It is then no longer a mere sense of security, but a certainty that whatever happens to the outward forms of society there is something one can trust, there is purpose, in the very continued existence of ordinary men and women getting on with the ordinary business of living. How little chance of " abundant life " has anyone whose focus of security has never shifted from his own home and Church and family !

The psychologists talk, too, of the disaster of parental possessiveness and the necessity of " letting our children go ". True enough, but we cannot do that unless we understand what it is we must let them go *to*. I have no dearer wish for my own children than that a sure and certain

knowledge of the God who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ should lead them into trust in the purpose of God *as it is daily expressed* in the work, relationships and associations of ordinary men and women. If they have that they will have a faith and a " lively hope " which all the evils and frustrations of society, and even an atomic bomb, will not be able to shatter. This is no superficial optimism about the state of earthly life. Indeed, I am sure it is impossible to move with joy and assurance in the life of society until one has some understanding of the depth and gravity of human sin. It is only when we know how bad we all are, that the miracle of ordinary goodness becomes apparent everywhere. Within the Church there is reason for depression because people are not better. Outside it one gives daily thanks to God that they are as good as they are. A belief in sin must go hand in hand with our endeavour to broaden the basis of our children's security. If they do not believe in it their sense of security will constantly be shattered. If they do they will know where they are. The home is the world in little in this respect. Any doubts I ever had about " original sin " vanished with the arrival of my first baby, though she was very good as babies go ! And I soon found that any attempt to keep up the illusion of the infallibility of parents or grown-ups in general was incompatible with the evidence available to any intelligent child. Our authority rests not on omniscience and omnipotence but on the fact that God has placed it in our hands and on a longer experience of mistakes and temptations so that we often know what is right because we have done wrong. From these elementary beginnings we have to develop in our children both the realization of what Christ did for the world on the Cross, and the realism in human affairs which works on the assumption that society will always be composed of sinners and not saints, but can be ordered in ways which are pleasing to God none the less.

KNOWING THE COMMUNITY

How are we to accomplish this task of " bringing the community alive " to our children, of making our homes places where the dependence of the family on the labour,

friendship and initiative of countless men and women is recognized as naturally as family ties themselves?

First, we must somehow achieve the building up of a picture of community life as complete as we can make it. With the rapid growth of our modern towns and cities this is becoming an increasingly difficult task. Far too many people are living in areas which are quite unrelated to each other, or to the economic and social realities of their town or city as a whole. Life in villages can be more satisfying, because the community is small enough to be a unit, but it can also be very limited in its outlook because it is isolated from many of the factors composing modern society. There are comparatively few areas left where, because of their actual setting, a naturally integrated community life is possible. I have the good fortune to live in one at the moment—an industrial village with its back door opening on to open country and its front door right into a belt of heavy industry. Factories, coal mines, power station, gas works, sewage farm, canal, railway, fields and farms, are all within sight of each other and there is a spontaneity and vigour about local life which I believe to be the natural outcome of its setting. As an educational background for a child it is well worth the smoke which accompanies it when the wind is in the wrong direction! Our eldest is only six, and we cannot tell how deep the education has gone, but she appears to me to have learnt quite naturally things which it took me thirty years or more to find out. Brought up in the professional, academic and business end of society and having, by all academic standards, a thoroughly "good" education, I did not begin for years to glimpse the real economic and social facts which lie behind the life of this country. I cared passionately about social conditions and as a student naturally discussed them *ad infinitum*—but it took the happy accidents of two years in East London, and one in a mining village, contrasted with a spell in Geneva and in a London suburb to make me see that wherever you happen to live you must have a "whole" picture of society as your background. The more limited the view imposed on us by the actual setting of our homes the more

deliberately must we set out to give our children first-hand knowledge of the whole community in which they live. The select " drawing-room " mentalities of those who controlled our social life in the past gave rise to such things as the slums and to the scantiest aids to cleanliness being given to those who did the dirtiest jobs. That same mentality led to the wide separation of the " kitchens " of society, where the work is done, from the residences of those who got most out of them. Is it surprising that workers who for generations have been confined to these " kitchens ", and who in addition have been denied opportunities for education and decent recreation, are not predisposed to appreciate the problems of the middle and upper classes, especially at this juncture in our political history? The mere extension of Christian goodwill can never break down these barriers. A good many holes can be knocked in them by the right kind of community experiment in our own generation. But the only chance of a permanent solution lies in the education of our children to be " members of one body " outside the Church as well as inside it. The new Education Act will mean a greater mixing of children in the schools and this is a step forward which all Christians should welcome thankfully. It is not merely that many of us, in being relieved of the temptation of claiming educational privileges for our children because we can pay for them, will be able to uphold the principle of equality of opportunity; it is also that in their schools our children will have a chance of making friends in all walks of life and, with the right assistance from us, may carry into maturity the ability to be as completely unselfconscious with members of all classes of society as they are in childhood.

ACTING IN THE COMMUNITY

I am sure that while our children will learn a great deal from our building up of the community picture through books, wireless programmes, family conversations and family friends, local visits, holidays and so on, their education will not be complete unless, from their earliest years, they find us taking active responsibility in community life.

This means real co-operation between husband and wife, the careful budgetting of family time and often, in the case of parents with young children, the organization of some sort of " mutual service " with other families in order to gain the necessary freedom for outside activities. We have got to decide how much time we spend on the actual running of our homes, how much on things that it is always good for the family to do together both at home and outside, how much on Church affairs, how much on other aspects of community life, educational, cultural or political. It is astonishing how many parents who make most careful monetary budgets see no importance in budgetting their time, but it is by the choices we make that we shall enable our children to make wise, balanced decisions about their own community activities in later years.

Because it is nearly always an " also-ran " in most Christian homes I want to make a special plea for political activity—and by this I do not mean just political discussion or the attending of meetings round about Municipal and General Elections. I mean getting into the ordinary local party machines, attending Ward meetings, finding out what jobs there are to be done. From the plain point of view of Christian responsibility we have no right to accept the work done by our local Councils and by Parliament without making some return. It is no use saying that party politics are dirty and accepting without question the benefits they confer; that is to soil our hands far more than to work in the political machine. I speak feelingly, because for years I combined a willingness to discuss politics with a quite abysmal ignorance as to what they were really about. In three years within a local party I have learnt more about how the life of this country is organized than I ever did in the couple of decades since I left school. I have been fascinated by what can be done for a local community by a vigorous party machine, and by the way in which, through its M.P., it can make a real contribution even to national affairs. (And I am overjoyed to find that even at the age of six my daughter has more political sense than I had at sixteen.

"We had a story in school," she remarked the other day, "about Jesus, who lives with God and looks after us —like you said the Council did." And then, thoughtfully, "Which looks after us most, God or the Council?" I admit the reflection on my religious teaching, but I feel that is the more easily remedied!) The Church contributes far too few men and women to local and national political life. It is doubtful whether parsons, with their vested interest in getting the work of the Church organized to their own liking, will ever provide the stimulus for Christian political responsibility. It must come from those homes where faith in God leads to a *realistic* view of responsibility in the ordering of community life—and it is the responsibility, too, of these homes to carry their concern and their experience into the life of the Church. Only so can we begin to break down the present tragic isolation of the Church from the life of the people.

I have said nothing about the work of the school in building up a picture of the community. It has been from lack of space rather than from appreciation of the quite excellent curricula on Citizenship, Current Affairs, Social and Economic conditions which are taught in many schools. But as in so many other realms, with the majority of children home is the deciding factor. It is in the proper relationship between home and community that children will find their real education for life.

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